

## ‘Exceeding the Age in Every Thing’: Placing Sloane’s Objects

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# ‘Exceeding the Age in Every Thing’

## Placing Sloane’s Objects\*

James Delbourgo<sup>†</sup>

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That objects of knowledge get moved across boundaries is well known. But how they get moved often goes unexamined. Modes of movement cannot be ignored when considering objects’ historical significance. Put differently, how geographies are negotiated is central to the constitution of knowledge objects. This essay offers a brief assessment of the competing agencies at work in the global collections of the Enlightenment naturalist Sir Hans Sloane (1660–1753). While discussing broadly the relationship between collecting and power in Sloane’s career, the essay stresses the passivity and strategic weakness of the collector, and suggests how the meanings of specific curiosities varied according to asymmetries in their mode of transfer.

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That objects of knowledge get moved across boundaries is well known. But how they get moved often goes unexamined. Modes of movement should not be ignored when considering objects’ historical significance. Put differently, how geographies are negotiated is central to the constitution of knowledge objects.

We begin with a conversation between a Gentleman and a Virtuoso in the year 1700, talking in London about things from faraway parts:

**Gentleman:** Every body must own, he is a great man in his way.

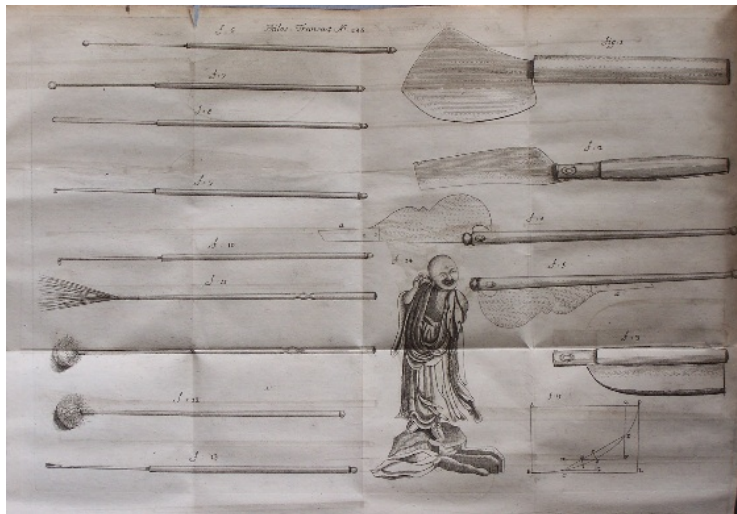
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**Virtuoso:** In his way! He is a great man in every thing; he's universally qualified; a great botanist, a great physician, a great philosopher, a great man, and a great naturalist.

**Gentleman:** Pray what hath he done in that way?

**Virtuoso:** Done, sir! He hath exceeded the age in every thing. He hath been so curious that nothing almost has passed him ...the first piece I shall mention is, an account of a China cabinet. This sir is a rarity that few people hath found it worth their while to write dissertations about, or indeed worth their notice; but I can assure you, our virtuoso, who is indeed the wonder of his age, values it at a high rate, and hath taken care to adorn several of the transactions with an account of its contents, and hath engraven them curiously upon copper-plates.



**Figure 1:** The contents of Bulkley's China cabinet as depicted in the Royal Society's *Philosophical Transactions*, 1698: ©Royal Society.

**Gentleman:** Oh dear! a great deal of curiosity must needs lye in those things: and the curiosity of the doctor, as well as his humility in stooping to take notice of such trifles is very commendable.

**Virtuoso:** Sir, he hath not so much as neglected an ear-picker or a rusty razor, for he values any thing that comes from the Indies or China at a high rate; for, were it but a pebble or a cockle-shell from thence, he would soon write a comment upon it, and perpetuate its memory upon a copper-plate.

**Gentleman:** Pray do you remember whose picture that is, that is engraven among the razors and tooth-pickers? What, is it the author's?



**Figure 2:** Courten's Chinese figurine, *Philosophical Transactions*, 1698: ©Royal Society.

**Virtuoso:** Fie! No. It's a 'Chinese figure, wherein is represented one of that nation, using one of these instruments (that is an ear-picker) and expressing great satisfaction therein...'

**Gentleman:** A great deal of satisfaction, indeed for a man to stand picking his ears! But pray of what use are the China ear-pickers, in the way of knowledge?

**Virtuoso:** Why, the learned author hath made this useful comment upon it: 'whatever pleasure the Chineses may take in thus picking their ears; I am certain, most people in these parts who have had their hearing impaired, have had such misfortunes first come to them, by picking their ears too much.'

**Gentleman:** Why then were they brought into these parts, if they be of such mischievous consequence?

**Virtuoso:** The chief design was, to entertain the philosophical secretary; for he took as much satisfaction in looking upon the ear-picker, as the Chinese could do in picking his ears. And truly, I think, that learned naturalist is obliged in gratitude to make some suitable return of our rarities to the Chinese." (King 1776, 14-15)

This fictional exchange comes from *The Transactioneer*, published by the satirist William King in 1700. Its target is the then Secretary of the Royal Society, Hans Sloane. It refers to a set of objects contained in an

actual Chinese cabinet of surgeon's instruments and sundry curiosities (Figure 3), about which Sloane had published three separate articles in the Society's *Philosophical Transactions*, and which survive in the collections of the British Museum to this day (Sloane 1698; 1699a; 1699b). Sloane did indeed identify such devices as the cause of Chinese hearing problems. What's interesting about this satire? It shows, first, how the greatest private collector of eighteenth-century Europe and future founder of the British Museum was a contested figure. People made fun of Sloane, as they had long made fun of virtuosos, a tradition epitomised by Shadwell's play (Shadwell 1676; Levine 1977). King did so on a specific basis, however: Sloane collected and prized junk. Not just any "trifles" but exotic ones. In *The Transactioneer*, ethnographic collecting is ludicrous; foreign objects are strange things to laugh at. Chinese ear-picking may be inherently funny in the hands of Augustan wits. But what is truly risible is that someone would expend resources to collect and display such useless things. Of course, the move here is a double one: ridicule of exotic provenance and the uselessness of objects out of place is ridicule of the collector as well. Global collecting circa 1700 is not self evident but vulnerable. Value is the crux of the matter. Sloane's aspiration to show his "universal" learning by assembling foreign curiosities contends with challenges to the worth of such assemblages. Crossing cultural boundaries might just be absurd.

It is tempting and traditional to emphasize the agency of the individual collector. But it is the weakness of the collector that is in evidence here: his weakness to control attributions of value to his objects as well as accreditations of his own connoisseurial skill. We might assume the production of such rarities to be a telling instance of the capacity of long distance European networks to move things across geographical and cultural boundaries. King's satire, however, challenges the projection of power in displaying displaced objects. Sloane stoops to scoop up trifles, and "values any thing that comes from the Indies or China at a high rate," observes the Virtuoso. "But pray what use are the China ear-pickers of, in the way of knowledge?" Global collecting is vulnerable: it aspires to demonstrate command of matter across distance but risks undermining itself by producing intractable problems of use/value.

What I want to emphasize here, against a brilliant tradition of reflection on the meaning of collecting that includes Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard, is not the agency and personality of the



**Figure 3:** The extant contents of the China cabinet: ©Trustees of the British Museum.

individual collector in constituting the meaning of the collection (Benjamin 1931; Barthes 1964; Baudrillard 1968); nor the notion that a collection expresses and performs the identity of the collector, as explored more recently by Maya Jasanoff (Jasanoff 2005); nor even, as Nick Thomas has trenchantly demonstrated, following Arjun Appadurai, the mutability of objects as they get transferred between radically different cultural systems (Thomas 1991; Appadurai 1986). Instead, I wish to argue for the weakness of the collector, his dependency, even his passive receptivity, and the vulnerability of collections to incoherence and critique. I also wish to stress the impersonality of such collections, given that many of Sloane's objects were unsolicited gifts from travellers and traders. We have often assumed that power flows from a centre that constitutes its peripheries. With Sloane, the reverse in many instances seems true: travellers constituted him, not as a centre of calculation but a hub of accumulation, onto which they projected their own concerns and ambitions—through the giving of objects. Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park have majestically reconceived the significance of objects of curiosity and marvel by linking them to histories of cognitive passion and scientific selfhood (Daston and Park 1998). Curiosities signify, insofar as they help illuminate categories of perception and experience such as wonder. This analysis however bears little relation to anthropological accounts of people moving objects across cultures, and has little to say about the work and networks that enable miscellaneous things to be redefined as objects of knowledge. The danger is that such objects might appear as spontaneous informants for a history of scientific practice and selfhood, as if no account of movement or negotiation were necessary to grasp their significance (see Harris 1988).

Returning to the anthropological tradition, how can we by contrast develop an account of curiosities that grasps their constitution through the very processes of displacement? The notion here is that the meanings of objects must be sought, at least in part, through how they get recontextualized, by whom, and to what end. Where Marx's concept of commodity fetishism draws attention to the sublimation of labour in perceptions of the character of goods (Marx 1992, 163-77), and Clifford insists on the importance of exhibiting the constructedness of "authentic" objects (Clifford 1988), scrutiny of what might be called "curiosity fetishism" can usefully make visible sublimated processes of movement and brokerage. Just as objects don't make themselves, they don't move themselves (Brown 2001). The matter of their meanings is always already spatial and geographical. An account that avoids reinforcing curiosity fetishism must go beyond the collector's gesture of merely identifying provenance—that which in fact produces the fetishizing effect of awe at exotic origins—and investigate wherever possible modes of

recontextualization.

Take the China cabinet. This was not an object solicited by Sloane. It was instead a gift from Edward Bulkley, surgeon with the East India company at Fort St. George (Madras) in India, one Sloane then chose to present at the Royal Society, as part of its strategic program of global ethnographic intelligencing, about which John Gascoigne has recently written (Gascoigne 2009). As Secretary, Sloane explicitly appealed for information on “the instruments and materials made use of in the places [travellers] come . . . that we may content ourselves with our own inventions where we go beyond them and imitate theirs wherein they go beyond ours” (Sloane 1699[b], 72). Bulkley’s dispatch of the cabinet from Madras indicates overlooked aspects of the movement of early modern ethnographic artifacts and both the mediated and composite character of Sloane’s collections. Bulkley was in fact a correspondent of Sloane’s protégé, the London apothecary James Petiver, to whom he sent several Bengali and Burmese plant specimens, which were ultimately absorbed into Sloane’s collections when Petiver died in 1718. Objects in other words followed plants: early modern traffic in exotic specimens to western Europe was not just botanical or commercial as so many scholars have recently emphasized, but also ethnographic. These demand attention as the pre-Banksian history of British anthropology, about which much remains to be understood. The movement of ethnographic materials into Sloane’s collection depended on pre-existing flows of materia medica and botanical specimens, not from field agents dispatched from the centre, but company agents and go-betweens already in the field (Bulkley conveyed specimens from other collectors as well, and is one of the few donors to the Sloane herbarium who attached local Indian names to botanical specimens, implying relatively direct contact with indigenous sources and/or belief in the importance of local nomenclature). The improvised nature of such transfers speaks to the contingencies of long-distance collecting in this era, in its dependency on pre-existing commercial networks. Such dependency is increasingly well understood in the current literature; what is less clear is the extent to which globally distributed donors imagined and actively constituted the collector as a hub of accumulation.

Note also the process by which Sloane came to appear as the sole author of the China cabinet’s presentation in the *Philosophical Transactions*. In reality, it was Sloane’s associate Petiver who had provided the crucial link to Bulkley. The Chinese figure, meanwhile, had been borrowed from Sloane’s friend William Courten, whose collection Sloane also acquired on the latter’s death in 1702. The presentation of the cabinet was thus a decisively mediated display of what might be called opportunistic global accumulation, rather than the result of an individual’s



active command of long-distance supply networks. As Latour cautions: let's resist the jump to the global; resist taking at face value the projections of local and contingent networks (Latour 2005). The China cabinet had not come directly from China; it was a gift to an associate of Sloane's, from a surgeon doubling as a botanical go-between in India, who was using the East India Company for his own private communications. Sloane's curiosity was an unsolicited stow-away on a merchantman.

Let's now attempt some first steps for theorizing the Sloane collections as a whole. This hoard of over 200,000 items was immensely varied (MacGregor 1994; Sloan and Burnett 2003). Their provenance ranged from China and Japan to Egypt, the Caribbean and the Arctic, and included medieval, ancient and contemporary materials. The financial basis for their acquisition by Sloane was no less diverse: major Chelsea land investments, a lucrative medical practice, and a stream of income from his wife's sugar plantations in Jamaica (De Beer 1953). These moneys were converted into plant and animal specimens; insects and fossils; anatomical curiosities; ethnographic objects; books; coins; manuscripts; prints and drawings; sculpture and art. Methods of acquisition varied too. Sections of the collection were assembled with the utmost deliberateness: the natural

specimens Sloane himself gathered while in Jamaica in the late-1680s, for example. As noted, Sloane was also a collector of collections, like Petiver's and Courten's, but this was bloc acquisition, not the parsing of target items. Without doubt, acquisitions of sculpture and drawings by artists like Albrecht Durer spoke of Sloane's aspiration, not uncommon among fellow physician-collectors like Richard Mead, to purchase fine pieces befitting a gentleman of taste who had risen from humble origins to transcend merely naturalistic pursuits. Agents like William Sherard bought for Sloane at auctions around Europe, while a procession of domestic curators including Cromwell Mortimer, Johann Caspar Scheuchzer and Johann Amman worked for years in Sloane's London residence to maintain the collections, labelling and indexing them. Although Sloane participated in



**Figure 4:** An eighteenth-century book-wheel, one of which Sloane owned and used, as depicted in Grollier de Servière, *Recueil d'Ouvrages Curieux de Mathématique et Mécanique* (Lyon, 1719): ©British Library Board, 60.e.12.





**Figure 5:** The silver cup “given” to John Bartram by Sloane in 1743: courtesy of Special Collections, the University of Pennsylvania.

this work, he required assistants, agents and mediators to manage them, since he devoted most of his time to his medical practice and the many offices he held.

What I am suggesting therefore is that Sloane was a collector by prosthesis: by extension beyond himself. The notion of the prosthetic collector is beautifully captured by the image of a mechanical book-wheel of the period, one of which Sloane owned and used (Figure 4). The machine, for “when one wishes to read or requires several books at a time” (Per Kalm, quoted in De Beer 1953, 132) enacted prosthetic collecting as a technology of self-extension. Sloane’s first biographer Thomas Birch tellingly praised the dense cross-referencing of botanical specimens in Sloane’s *Natural History of Jamaica* (Sloane 1707-1725) as something “perhaps no library in the world but his own could have enabled him to make” (Birch 1753, 13). The NHJ’s botanical inventory depended as much on library work as fieldwork, and the prosthetic transformation enabled not just by collecting, but by a collective of object managers, financially underwritten by elite medical clients and domestic and colonial investments, and serviced by a heterogeneous network of traveler agents.

I want to conclude by thinking more about the generative activity of that network and its constitution of Sloane as a hub; and by linking it to a

particular source of non-European knowledge—that of enslaved Africans in Britain's Caribbean colonies. Is Sloane merely another specimen of scientific self-fashioning among collectors and naturalists of the early modern era, the like of which Paula Findlen has given us an exemplary account? Not entirely. Perhaps accounts of scientific self-fashioning are too faithful to the notion of individual agency. What Sloane became was as much the result of others' work as his. This is exquisitely demonstrated by the silver cup he gave as a gift to the Pennsylvania botanist John Bartram (Figure 5). The cup is in fact wonderfully deceptive: it was Bartram who commissioned it to be made by their mutual friend Peter Collinson for the sum of five guineas he'd been given in return for specimens by Sloane, and Sloane who acceded (Bartram 1992, 215). This is revealing. If collectors collect suppliers, here the supplier collected the collector, turning him into an object to be possessed and displayed for his own local purposes.

Other forms of organization that might seem to be an individual collector's work are really only intelligible by understanding them as the products of a collectivity. Thus, descriptions in Sloane catalogues often turn out to be verbatim transcriptions from letters sent by the donor—not Sloane's words at all—such as the description of an African anatomical specimen sent from Virginia by John Symmer as an unsolicited gift designed to open a correspondence with Sloane, whom Symmer had never in fact met (Sloane n.d.a, entry no. 692). The meanings of such objects were made often primarily by others' motives, resources and accountings. Similarly, Sloane's collection of thousands of vegetable substances is not the work of a single, discriminating individual but a collective documentation centre of materia medica that simultaneously documents a network of donors and suppliers (Figure 6). In Maussian terms, these were not free gifts but curiosities transmitted to broker relations of exchange (Mauss 1923-1924). Symmer, and a host of other long-distance suppliers—like Henry Barham in Jamaica, the Caribbean itinerant Robert Millar, and John Burnet, a South Sea Company surgeon based in Cartagena—expected either exchange in kind, or more likely, advancement in return.

Sloane would not have known the utility, profitability or often even the identity of much of what he received. Most natural specimens were not, after all, cochineal, cinchona or cacao. But he accepted the gifts aimed at



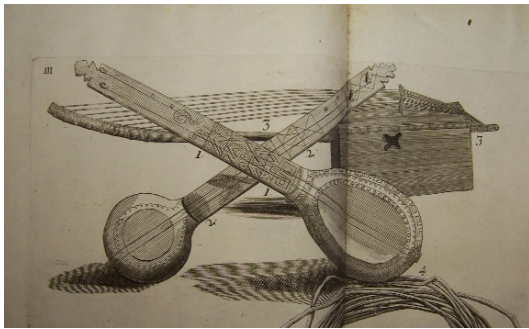
**Figure 6:** A sample of Sloane's Vegetable Substances collection: Department of Botany, Natural History Museum, London (photograph by author).

him liberally and inclusively. To reject them would have been to foreclose future possibilities for collecting those parts of the world that other, less well connected collectors could not reach. In this sense it was *necessary* for Sloane to accept: the weakness of his position was the danger of missing out on the potential for valuable communications in future (Delbourgo 2008). He was in reality collecting people as much as collecting things: live suppliers as well as the collections of the dead, to constantly generate intelligence networks linking him to the Americas, South and East Asia, and beyond. This was the position of epistemic dependency which the collector's art then re-presented as one of power, in assuming the right to speak, in his museum, about his objects. *The Transactioneer* accurately exposed the epistemic dependency of a "centre" constituted by the claims and ambitions of its outliers. When pressed on the credibility of accounts he has received accompanying certain anatomical curiosities, King's fictional Sloane tellingly responds, "I rely so much upon the sincerity of my correspondents that I cannot tell how to disbelieve it" (King 1700, 54).

My final thoughts relate to the conjunction of colonial trading and object collecting in Sloane's specific case. Sloane was directly implicated in the slave trade and the plantation complex: through his service to Jamaica's governor, Christopher Monck, Duke of Albemarle; his marriage to Elizabeth Langley Rose, which provided sugar income and sustained a lifelong family connection to Jamaica; his network of correspondents who lived on New World plantations; and for the intelligence he relied on to gather specimens while in Jamaica himself (Delbourgo 2007). African slaves were themselves widely used as collectors throughout the Americas for reasons of local knowledge and settlers' fear of physical danger (Parrish 2006). The man who succeeded Isaac Newton as President of the Royal Society in 1727 was one whose fortunes thus rested on an economic order underpinned by plantations and African enslavement. Sloane rejected slaves' medical techniques, but he explicitly sought their knowledge of simples—not as indigenes but go-betweens, believing them to be the living repository of Spanish knowledge of Jamaican flora and fauna from before the English conquest of 1655. Sloane visited provisioning grounds worked by Africans to gain such knowledge directly and remarked that he "looked into as much as [he] could" their use of the anti-malarial Jesuits' Bark (Sloane 1707, cxli).

I want to close however with the artifact Sloane called a "Jamaica strum strum" (Sloane n.d.b, entry no. 56) (Figure 7). This object is evidence of Sloane at work in the field as an ethnographic collector—an object he himself carefully preserved and brought back to London from the West Indies. Again, objects followed plants in early modern ethnography: its representation was prepared in London several years later by Everhardus

Kickius, who drew the vast majority of Sloane's plant specimens for the *Natural History of Jamaica*, where this engraving also appeared. What such an object "meant" for those who may have seen it in Sloane's collection, or indeed in the pages of this book, is complex to sort out. The text of the NHJ depicted African dance and music as lustful and basely passionate in character. On the other hand, Sloane's careful preservation of this instrument implied a veneration of its craftsmanship, recognition of African dexterity, and a desire to contribute information towards the natural history of the people then becoming England's slaves. As an object of cultural curiosity, its transportation and preservation contradicted anti-exotic philosophies of aesthetics in the period, notably the Earl of Shaftesbury's, which insisted that Europeans forego contemplation of foreign arts as an inherently corrupting pursuit (Carey 2006, 125-26).



**Figure 7:** Sloane's strum strum, taken from Jamaica in 1689, and as depicted by Everhardus Kickius for the first volume of the *Natural History of Jamaica*, 1707: Botany Library, Natural History Museum, London.

How the future founder of the British Museum obtained a guitar from slaves in situ is a question worth pondering. We know that Sloane witnessed African dances in Jamaica, but we crucially do not know how he acquired this instrument. It may have been taken violently; acquired through the mediation of planters; or possibly even given through some form of exchange with slaves. However done, the transfer undeniably took place in the context of coercion and

violence produced by Jamaica's emergent plantation system. The point I close with is this: Britons might embrace or reject the value of exotic curiosities as they saw fit. They might marvel at the work of foreign craftspeople or recoil at their lack of taste. Either way, their self-fashioning as persons of knowledge and taste was conditioned by engagements with non-European worlds, brokered by colonial trading. Objects like the strum strum—and the China cabinet—thus speak not to English curiosity or African or Chinese craftsmanship singly, but the relations of transfer created by the interaction between non-Europeans and Europeans. These relations were not uniform but varied. The "border fetishism"—in other words, the command of attention generated by movement across boundaries—was not the same in each case. The China cabinet and the strum strum possess different historical meanings because of their different pathways: contrast the contingency involved in the cabinet's

passage versus the seemingly overwhelming relations of power that took the strum strum from the hands of slaves. While our aim should be to understand the relationship between global collecting and imperial power, therefore, we must also recognise the distinct historical meanings borne by specific curiosities that result from different modes of transfer.

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